

Are longer established academies any more successful?

- *The achievement of disadvantaged pupils is better in longer-established academies than in academies overall. However, even in these well established academies, disadvantaged pupils do not achieve significantly better than in other maintained schools*
- *Even the longer-established academies are five times as likely as other schools to come below the Government's 'floor target'. But for zealous use of alternatives to GCSE, nearly 1 in 3 would fall below the floor.*
- *Less than half of the older academies have improved their KS4 attainment results more than other English schools, once we consider heavy exploitation of 'equivalent' qualifications, and a fifth have declined.*
- *Low attainment levels in longer established academies in particular can not convincingly be explained by referring to low attainment in the schools they replaced - schools which have been closed now for five years or longer.*

It is not surprising to hear the argument that it takes time to 'turn around' a low-achieving school. Unfortunately this understanding is rarely applied to other schools and improvement initiatives. Older academies perform no better than other academies on most indicators. Although on some indicators the performance of longer-established academies is better than other academies, the length of time for which they have been open, i.e. between five and nine years, has not enabled them to demonstrate the benefits of academy governance. We are dealing here with academies which were opened between September 2002 and 2006, in other words long enough for GCSE candidates in the summer of 2011 to have spent all of Years 7-11 in an academy.

Much of the evidence relating to these long-established academies has already been presented, but it may be useful to bring it together here:

i) Older academies tend to have more serious deprivation, though most have reduced this compared with the schools they replaced, as well as attracting more high achieving students. In older academies, 33 percent of pupils on average are entitled to free school meals; this is double the national average, but typical of cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and inner London. These long-established academies have a wide range of origins and characteristics, however, and some of them have changed radically in terms of pupil characteristics since conversion to academies. Consequently, it is difficult to see more than half of them as continuations of severely disadvantaged schools in terms of pupil profile.

ii) In terms of the prior attainment of their pupils, based on Key Stage 2 tests, most of these older academies have pupil profiles below the national average, though only half have very few higher attainers (i.e. below 20%, compared with a national average of 32% high prior attainers).

iii) 51% of pupils in these older academies achieved 5ACemEQ (i.e. including equivalents), and 40% achieved 5ACemG, i.e. relying on GCSEs alone. This is clearly below the national average. These older academies rely on ‘equivalents’ a little less than other academies but far more than other schools.

iv) Among disadvantaged pupils in these older academies, 40% achieved 5ACemEQ and 30% 5ACemG. The 5ACemG figure is above that for academies in general but only marginally higher than the average for maintained mainstream schools in England (28.6%). In other words, out of every hundred disadvantaged pupils in these long-established academies, just one or two more pupils achieve this compared with non-academy schools. Looking at this another way, the difference is so small that, if we were to remove just one of the more successful academies in this group, there would be no difference at all between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in the older academies and the achievement of their counterparts in ordinary maintained schools.

v) The introduction of the English Baccalaureate has proved as problematic for the older academies as for academies in general. On average, 8% of their students gained A*-C grade GCSEs in EBacc subjects, which is similar to other academies and half the level of all maintained schools. Only half of the older academies have 5% or above of students gaining EBacc subject qualifications, and leaving aside more advantaged academies, only 1 in 4.

vi) The ‘floor target’ problem remains serious even for these older academies: 6 of the 44 came below (5ACemEQ), similar to academies in general and *five times as high* a proportion as for all maintained schools (1 in 34). It is only the zealous use of ‘equivalents’ which stops this statistic being even worse: if a ‘floor target’ were constructed for 5ACemG, i.e. by GCSEs alone, nearly 1 in 3 of the older academies would fall below.

vii) The 2011 results for this group of well-established academies was compared to their 2007 results, using 5ACemEQ data and after controlling for the shift in attainment for all maintained schools nationally. This was intended to show whether this group were improving more than all maintained schools. A fifth showed a decline and a fifth no trend. Three-fifths appeared to improve more than other schools. However, large numbers of these make extensive use of ‘equivalents’ so only a minority of these well-established academies can safely be said to have improved more than other schools. This is despite the fact that more disadvantage schools nationally have tended to improve faster.

viii) We also attempted to measure attainment at the end of KS4 against expectations based on prior attainment at age 11, using an experimental method described in TN7. The effectiveness of these older academies, on this measure, ranged from +40 to -20. Bearing in mind the reservations expressed at the end of TN7, this is an enormous range, and not much narrower than for academies in general.

In conclusion, it is difficult, even in terms of long-established academies, to conclude that they have lived up to official expectations. There has been a definite improvement for some, and ongoing problems for others. Direct comparison is not always easy because of changes in the characteristics of their student population.

Finally, it becomes difficult to explain continuing problems of attainment in many of these older academies on the basis of predecessor schools which closed between five and nine years earlier. There must surely be a time limit on how long the state of predecessor schools can serve as an official explanation for current attainment levels in academies.

These 44 schools had been academies for at least five years, so that pupils sitting examinations in 2011 had undertaken their entire secondary education at an academy. Most of these academies have had the benefit of new buildings and additional 'fresh start' resourcing. Many of these academies have been able to change their status in local pecking orders of parental choice, through the prestige granted by governments to their academy status. To all intents and purposes these are new schools which should now be evaluated according to their current performance, rather than by comparison with the schools which were closed many years earlier to make way for them.